



February 25, 2007

Luke 4: 1-13
February 25, 2007

“The Unmasked Man”

(Begin by placing a mask over face—look around, then ask: “Would this be distracting to you if I preached this morning wearing this mask? Would it interfere with the communication process? Would it make it harder for you to hear what I have to say? To experience connection with each other?)

(Take off mask) I think you’re right. It would. It would be a barrier between us.

This mask is concrete, palpable. There are masks we wear that we cannot see or touch that are just as real. We are people who wear masks.

Why? Many reasons.

We wear masks to protect ourselves from harm: from others’ judgment, criticism, put-downs, denigration.

We wear masks to look good. We’ve been taught to put our best foot forward, to show our best face to others.

Sometimes both of these reasons are at work. As a woman in our culture, I wear makeup, because I think it enhances my appearance. As my kids were growing up they’d ask me, “Why? Why do you wear makeup all the time?” I didn’t have a good answer. Once I lost my purse—it was locked in a school over the week-end after I attended a concert there. I had to wait until Monday morning to get it back. I was too cheap to buy any, so I went to church that Sunday without makeup. It was quite disconcerting. People kept asking me things like, “Gee, Ronni, are you ok? You don’t look well today. You look kind of tired this morning.” Maybe I WAS tired, but I hated feeling so exposed and vulnerable. So, I wear makeup.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent: the forty days preceding Easter, not counting Sundays. The forty days of Lent remind us of Christ's forty days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness, just before he began his ministry.

Lent began last Wednesday, with our Ash Wednesday worship. During Lent we are reminded of two realities: sin and death. We do wrong. All of us. And we will die. All of us. During Lent we are challenged to face and recognize our sins. We are challenged to recognize that our earthly lives will come to an end. This process doesn't fit well with the culture we live in. Recognizing the reality of death and sin is not part of our daily routine. We think of this as mournful and heavy and hard----- and, of course, it is.

But----- Lent can also be a period of joy. Why? Because there is tremendous liberation to be found in facing facts; in telling the truth; in being who we really are; ----- in dropping our masks. We are not perfect—we're sinners. Why pretend? We are frail and mortal. Why pretend? Lent is a time to be freed from masks.

Our reading for today tells of Jesus' forty-day period of fasting and temptation in the desert. In this story we find Jesus being REAL, telling the truth, using no masks. We can learn from Jesus.

First, this story helps us drop the mask of struggling with sin. Christians are tempted to wear masks that suggest they do not have too much difficulty being and doing all that God wants. BALONEY! If we think that, we are fooling ourselves. Jesus, the Christ, God in the flesh, struggled HARD with sin. He was tempted by Satan. What makes us assume the ridiculous pretense of being exempt from this difficulty?

Let's consider the three temptations of Jesus. In each we see a Jesus who was REAL. First, Jesus was hungry. Hunger is real. He had not eaten for a LONG period of time. (But remember, this was his choice. He believed it was important for his spiritual journey at that particular time. This is different from the hunger caused by depriving people of food through injustices of the world.)

Still, he was hungry. He didn't deny it--- you know, the way we do when we're dieting and someone offers us dessert, and instead of saying, "I'm absolutely aching for that triple fudge, six layer cake you're offering me, but I am committed to sticking to my diet"--- we say, "Oh, no, thank you, really, I'm stuffed." Jesus was HUNGRY. But he knew being ruled by his appetites, by his needs, was enslavement. He had made a decision. And he claimed his freedom not to eat. We do not live by bread alone. We are not slaves to our appetites.

Tony Walter, in his book *Need: The New Religion*, says our current view of life sees the self as "*a bundle of needs..... and personal growth is the business of*

progressively meeting those needs.... One mark of the almost total success of this new morality is that the Christian church, traditionally keen on crucifying themes of the self in pursuit of Christ's likeness, has eagerly adopted the language of needs for itself. We now hear that Jesus will meet your every need, as though he were some kind of.....Divine detergent.....as though God (exists) simply to serve us."

We do not live by bread alone. We have power to resist being ruled by our appetites.

In the second temptation Jesus was invited by the devil to rule over all the kingdoms of the world, if only he would worship Satan. Here again, Jesus was REAL. He knew he had special gifts and abilities. In each of us, gifts and talents are REAL and present. But they are given to share with all God's children, to enrich their lives as well as ours. Jesus was tempted to use his gifts in ways that would set him ABOVE others. Gifts and abilities are ALWAYS given for others, NEVER to be raised above others. Using them that way is devil worship.

I once heard a chaplain of the Chicago Bulls speak. He asked for our prayers for professional athletes, describing the star system they live and work within. There are great temptations for them to see themselves as a breed apart. The chaplain said, "I keep trying to tell them they are ordinary people with extraordinary gifts." Jesus reminds us, God alone is worthy of our worship, and any gifts, authority or power we have is given by God to serve him and others.

Finally, Satan led Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple and suggested he throw himself off to prove his special status with God. Jesus was aware of his special nature, of being divine. This was REAL, a great mystery, but REAL. But it was also REAL that Jesus was fully human. He was human and lived with the same temptations and limitations we all face. Jesus did not allow the devil to lead him to flaunt his divinity or deny his humanity. The devil was tempting him to deny one aspect of himself, to be what he was not, to put on the mask of a God NOT in the flesh—and swoop around like Superman. Jesus said, "That's not REAL. That's not who I am. Don't tempt me. Don't tempt God."

I want you to notice something in this Bible passage. The devil tempted Jesus by **quoting Scripture**. He recited from Psalm 91. He used Scripture to tempt Jesus to do something WRONG—something that was not God's will. Friends, Jesus shows us here that the words of the Bible have to be heard and applied to specific situations and specific times, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Psalm 91's promises of God's comfort, of God's guardian angels are given in the language of imagery. If we stub our toes on stones, it does not mean God is not with us. And God being with us, does not mean we should defy the laws of gravity and throw ourselves off the top of tall buildings. God designed the laws of gravity. The Psalm is poetry which describes God's love and protection. Jesus knew he was divine and human--- he was REAL. He did not let the devil's interpretation of Scripture tempt him to try to be what he was not.

Jesus was REAL. He has shown us the way to be REAL. This Lenten period can be a time for us to practice being REAL; to ask God to teach us how to come out from behind our masks.

Those of you who are my age and older may remember the television show *The Lone Ranger*. That hero of the old west rode into town to deal with evil. And when he rode off into the sunset, folks turned to each other and asked, “Who WAS that masked man?”

Jesus came into town to deal with evil also. And when he left this world, he left as the *unmasked man*. One who told us the truth. One who was REAL. He went from his good deeds to a cross. He was killed. It’s not easy to live without masks. But on Easter, Jesus was raised from death to new life. This is how it works. He told us: the truth will make you free. Masks are for mummies and corpses. We are called into LIFE! Through Christ may we move from death to life. With Christ may we live in truth and light. Let’s follow the *unmasked man*.